



www.invisible-dog.com

invisibledog@email.com

A SOLUTION TO THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM: THE NEXT INTIFADA?

To evaluate the Palestinian problem, its possible developments and solutions, it is sufficient to take a look at the opinion polls carried out on the opposite fronts. Right after the Israeli elections of March 17, 2015, the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research gathered the opinions of the Palestinians: 47% of them think that the relationship with Israel will worsen; 32% doesn't think that it will change at all; 36% is contrary to negotiations and 68% is favorable to the launching of new missiles against Israel until their siege of the Gaza Strip comes to an end.

A similar survey was carried out by an American team right after the Israeli elections and the result was as follows: the Israeli are substantially satisfied with the status quo; Benjamin Netanyahu is perceived as being a "strong" leader; the security issue is the main concern that guides the choice of electors. In other words, Palestinian skepticism clashes with Israeli rigidity.

If this is the prevailing feeling among the two communities, what is the possible way out of the Palestinian issue now that there are no negotiations on the table? A new Intifada? A new armed conflict with the subsequent deaths caused by missiles, bombardments and a new invasion of Gaza?

Unfortunately, if the situation doesn't change, if the Israeli settlements continue to expand, if Netanyahu continues to deny the possibility of a Palestinian State and if, on the other side, Hamas continues to opt for the military solution, then there will be no viable alternatives. In the modern Middle East, every pretext provides more room for instability and growing tension. And if the armed conflict between Palestinians and Israelis were to begin anew, a number of other regional actors will inevitably get involved.

The unequivocal signs that the contenders in this endless social drama are getting ready for a novel conflict are already visible. In the past, we have seen Hamas teaming up with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in its fight against Israel. But the coming scenario could see the involvement of other sectors of the Palestinian diaspora and the fire could spread even in the other occupied territories. If this were to happen, we would see the beginning of a new Intifada.

The issue of procurement

Hamas, the most extreme Palestinian faction, doesn't have the support or complacent connivance of the Egyptian authorities like they did in the past. The ousting of President Mohamed Morsi has interrupted the political-religious and operative ties that gave the

Palestinians of Gaza the logistics to fuel their military campaign. General Abdel Fattah Al Sisi has arrested the heads of the Muslim Brothers with whom Hamas had ties and from whom they received support. Also, he added both organizations – Hamas and the Brothers – to Egypt's list of terrorist organizations.

By so doing, the Sinai has put an end to its operative functions in the fight against Israel. Yet it is the same Sinai where the terrorist militias of Ansar Beit al Maqdis, now an affiliate of the ISIS, are all-powerful. This brings Hamas to an inevitable alliance with the more radical fringes because they represent the only options left for those in Gaza to continue to receive weapons and support. Al Sisi thinks that Hamas supports the Beit al Maqdis, but terrorism in the Sinai peninsula is not caused by this alliance, rather, it is its side effect.

Yet before a new war is started, it is imperative that the weapons to fight be delivered to Gaza. And the challenge between Hamas and Egypt on the one side, and Israel on the other, is centered on this precise issue. Abdel Fattah Al Sisi has recently approved new regulations that increase maximum prison terms for those that dig tunnels leading into the country to 25 years behind bars, the maximum punishment allowed by the Egyptian judicial system. The same punishment is landed on those that know about the tunnels and fail to report what they know to authorities. In October 2014, Al Sisi also decided to create a buffer zone between Gaza and the Sinai. Initially, this area was 500 meters wide, but it can be extended to up to one kilometer. All of the artifacts and homes within this area have been or will be destroyed. There are also further restrictions regarding the construction companies operating in the Sinai: there is a sort of embargo on the construction materials that they employ. Al Sisi's initiative is aimed at curbing the construction of tunnels that serve the purpose of getting weapons to Hamas and of giving terrorists a safe escape route out of the Sinai.

Lately, Egyptian authorities have discovered a 2,8 km long tunnel; the longest that they have found so far. This tunnel is not a rough, handmade, construction; it was built with sophisticated means and with the expenditure of grand financial resources. This circumstance sounded an alarm bell, especially since the border between the Strip and Egypt is roughly 20 kilometers long. In a waiver of the Camp David accords, which do not allow a military presence in the areas near the border, Israel has now allowed such presence on the part of Egypt.

The fact that weapons are transported to Gaza from the Sinai is indirectly demonstrated by the Israeli raid of July 2014 against an arms cache near Khartoum. The cache was comprised of weapons that were probably coming from Iran and presumably dedicated to the Palestinian plight. The Israeli intelligence has also recently stated that Teheran is currently re-arming the Hezbollah and Hamas; the latter would see weapons sent not only to Gaza, but to the West Bank as well.

Another way of sending weapons and tunnel-building materials to Gaza is via boat. Israel and Egypt are enacting rigid inspections on all the Palestinian fishing vessels which, after the 2014 peace accords, are allowed to fish within 6 miles of the coastal line. In the past few months there have been roughly 30 clashes between Israeli military vessels and Palestinian fishing boats with subsequent injuries, arrests and seizures.

Apart from the procurement of weapons, there are other ongoing preparations for the coming war. On the Palestinian side, the priority seems to be the training of snipers. In fact, a number of Austrian precision rifles, sold to Iran between 2006 and 2009, were found in the weapons cache belonging to Hamas during the latest invasion. The Brigade Ezzedin al Qassam, the military wing of Hamas, has created a number of training camps near the border with Israel. On the opposite front, Israel has adopted an electric-optical system that has the capacity to pinpoint the location of a sniper right after he fires his shot.

Finally, there is the tunnel issue which, as is the case with the ones that were dug during the last conflict, are built by Hamas in order to enter Israel with the intent to carry out terrorist activity and kidnappings. If, on the one side, the tunnels are still being dug, on the other, there is a frenetic activity to find solutions on how to locate and destroy them. The Israeli army has recently trained a special squad which uses sensors that are able to locate excavation activities.

War for lack of alternatives

All of the above provisions are evidently part of the preparation for a future conflict that the opposing sides deem inevitable. The alternative to the military option would be a diplomatic solution to the problem, something which seems unlikely with the re-election of Netanyahu at the helm of Israel.

In the meantime, the tensions between Hamas and Israel seem to reverberate in the relationship between Hamas and the Palestinian National Authority in the occupied territories. Lately, there have been rumors of a Hamas conspiracy to eliminate Mahmoud Abbas. The rumors were followed by a wave of arrests of Islamic Palestinian militants in the West Bank. Clearly, if the negotiations carried forth by the Palestinian President should yield no fruit, it would allow more room for the exponential growth of the more radical Palestinian factions. And if Abu Mazen will not be able to manage the growing resentment and frustration among the population, then the war would not be between Hamas – which represents roughly 1,8 million Palestinians living in the Strip – and Israel, but rather between the entire Palestinian population and Tel Aviv. This would be a very serious development that would fuel further tensions in the Middle East and which could lead to the fusion between Palestinian terrorism and the other radical fringes that operate in the region.

However – and this is the sole positive note in the scenario – there seem to be some timid attempts to avoid a new conflict. Turkey and Qatar have come forth saying that they could mediate between Israel and Hamas in order to achieve a five-year cease fire, which would include the construction of a new harbor in Gaza. Yet the incidents in Israel and the demonstrations in Palestine have increased exponentially, leading to arrests by the hundreds, half of which are of youths younger than 18.

Apart from the Turkish-Qatari initiative, there are rumors that Hamas has contacted the Israeli authorities directly. The initiative was allegedly enacted before the Israeli elections, but the re-election of Netanyahu to the office of Prime Minister could invalidate the attempt. It is important to evaluate the intentions and objectives of the two opposing sides:

Hamas could try to buy time to better prepare itself for an armed conflict. Israel could be interested in weakening the leadership of Abu Mazen in order to force the Palestinian National Authority, which is the only internationally credible institution in the country, to adopt a more acquiescent position.

Either way, both actors of the 2014 war tagged "Protective Edge" seem to have forgotten the endless mourning and pain that they have caused: 3.360 missiles fired from Gaza; 4.762 targets bombed by Israel; over 2.200 murdered Palestinians (of which 89% were civilians and 500 were minors); 71 Israeli casualties; thousands of wounded; 18.000 homes destroyed or damaged in the Strip; over 100.000 Palestinians left without a place to live. Evidently, all of this was not enough to convince the opposing factions that a new war can produce no meaningful results for their future.

THE WORLD'S CALIPHATES

The birth of a caliphate, as proposed by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, is a piece of the history of Islam that followed the death of Mohamed. The caliph or “successor” was the political and religious guide, combining both spiritual and secular powers. He carried forth the Prophet's agenda and the expansion of Islam around the globe. Historically, the days of the caliphs were an epoch of territorial conquests.

Zarqawi vs Baghdadi

It is not a coincidence that Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al Badri al Samarra'i, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's real name, has a tendency to identify himself and his territorial gains with this specific part of the history of Islam. He picked up Abu Bakr's name because he was the first caliph and father-in-law of Mohamed. He then added the “Al Baghdadi” attribute to identify where he comes from or, possibly, to declare what his main target is. Another possibility is that, given that his predecessor in the fight against the Iraq's Shia leadership was the now defunct Ahmad Fadeel al-Nazal al-Khalayleh, also known as Abu Musab al Zarqawi (Zarqa, in Jordan, was his hometown), Abu Bakr decided to also include a city's name in his last name.

The reference to caliph Abu Bakr is also a clear referral to a caliphate that within a short time span was marked by a series of victories against apostasy, expanded the Umma – the Islamic community – and was led by a man that despite being rich lived a humble life. If Abu Bakr's was the first caliphate, the last one was the Ottoman Empire, that lasted from the fourteenth century until it was abolished in 1924 when the empire dissolved.

Zarqawi fought against the Shia government in Baghdad and against the US occupation that followed the 2003 invasion of Iraq. This objective was contained within the Iraqi boundaries. Al Baghdadi, instead, has raised his stakes: he wants to establish an Islamic State beyond the border of Iraq and, rather than fighting against the infidels (the US and the other nations participating in the international coalition), is targeting the apostates, be they Sunni or Shia, that do not adhere to his project.

Both Zarqawi and Al Baghdadi have used terrorism and have some similarities in how they employ or exploit terror. The difference is that Zarqawi's Jama'at al Tawhid wal Jihad was confined to the Iraqi events of its time, while Baghdadi's ISIS was formed in Syria and then spilled over to Iraq.

The franchising of the caliph

Al Baghdadi's project is definitely ambitious, with messianic undertones, a dream like the ones the caliph Abu Bakr knew how to interpret. Yet his reverie, thanks to his organization, the mystical elements contained there-in that take us back in time to the dawn of Islam and the aim of creating an independent territorial entity, has led to the proliferation of self-proclaimed caliphates around the world.

This is the same franchising effect and imitation game that took place when Al Qaeda was at its peak of fame and success under the leadership of Osama bin Laden. But it is also

clear that the newborn caliphates sprang up in most cases where regional conflicts were already ongoing. The affiliation with the ISIS only came at a later stage. And if the name in the background has changed, the targets of the revolutionary actions have not. This implies that the new caliphates have become a tool of propaganda to establish a new trademark. The media hype around the ISIS due to its ruthlessness has made the rest. Now everyone wants to be part of a global struggle in the name of religion, a war worth fighting and dying for.

What brings the ISIS and the other caliphates together is the transhumance of terrorists roaming around the world from one crisis zone to the next, anywhere they can exercise their destabilizing activities. And this is a recurrent circumstance in the Middle East and Africa. In this hunt for proselytes, the brand of the ISIS has become a celebrity and is bound to take over once prestigious labels such as Al Qaeda.

There is still some ongoing competition between the two terrorist brands. In Syria, for instance, Jabhat al Nusra, Ahrar al Sham and Khorasan claim that they are affiliated with Al Qaeda; Harakat Sham al Islam and Suqour al Izz have joined the ISIS instead; Ansar al Islam, after an initial clash with the ISIS, has decided to remain equidistant. There is also the possibility that both terrorist brands will decide to abandon their rivalry and merge in the near future.

The blossoming of the caliphates

Over the last few months, more and more caliphates have been proclaimed. In some cases we are talking about mere jihadist cells that have expressed their allegiance to the ISIS without having any real ties with Baghdadi's organization. But just where are these caliphates? Well, there is the one established by the Tehrik i Taliban Pakistan, the Pakistani talibans, along the border with Afghanistan, ISIS flags have surfaced in Kashmir (on the Indian side of the border) and in Waziristan (the tribal area between Afghanistan and Pakistan). To confirm this trend, a recent attack in Jalalabad in Afghanistan that killed 34 people was claimed by the ISIS.

More countries and single terrorist cells have also joined the domino effect in Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Chechnya and the Chinese region of Xinjiang. Even an historical terrorist group on the scene since 1991, like Abu Sayaf's Harakat al Islamiyah in the Philippines, has also declared its affiliation. The strong ties with the ISIS are a direct consequence of the presence of Afghan and Pakistani veterans in the ranks of Al Baghdadi's militias.

The biggest threat from the expansion of the ISIS, or rather of its ideology and modus operandi, comes from the Middle East and Africa. In the Sahel two AQIM factions, Jund al Khalifa, led until its leader's death in January 2015 by Abdelmalek Gouri, and the one under the command of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, have both joined the ISIS. So have the Shabaab in Somalia and, foremost, Boko Haram in Nigeria. Endemic poverty, the absence of civil liberties and of any hope for a better life make of Africa one of the largest potential breeding grounds for the ISIS.

In North Africa the most prominent group is the Egyptian Ansar Beit al Maqdis, that has established a caliphate in the Sinai peninsula. They have strong ties with a number of terrorist groups in Egypt, like a newborn faction that has surfaced in January 2015, Agnad Misr, and that is probably a splinter faction of the Jihad Islamiyah. Another affiliated group in Egypt are the Al Furqan Brigades.

A similar scenario is taking place in Tunisia and Yemen with Ansar al Sharia, whose local branches have publicly announced their ties with Al Baghdadi. In Morocco and Jordan words of allegiance have come from single terrorist cells. But, as we've said, most of these terrorist groups have expressed a mere political affiliation with the ISIS.

Libya is a different case altogether. The self-proclaimed caliphate established in Derna blossomed after the ISIS was formed, since no terrorist group was allowed to operate freely in Libya so long as Muammar Khadafi was around. A decisive role was played by the Ansar al Sharia fighters and their recently killed leader Mohammed al Zahawi. Key elements in this caliphate were also a brigade of Libyan veterans that returned from Syria and joined the Al Battar Brigade. In this case the ISIS played a role in the establishment of the local caliphate, as the appearance of the ISIS in Sirte indirectly confirms.

Future developments

The main question we should pose ourselves is whether, apart from a common branding, there are operational ties between the different caliphates around the world. To date this does not seem to be the case. As an Egyptian commander from the Beit al Maqdis has recently explained, the communications with the ISIS take place over the internet. Ideas are shared, methods are discussed, behaviours may be imposed, but each group still maintains its own independence. The same approach is used when it comes to exploiting the media to publicize an attack: the echo will be larger if the right label is used.

The real danger from the expansion of the ISIS's fascination in the Islamic world is not the proliferation of caliphates per se, but rather the effects the success of their aggressive military strategy may have in the decision-making process of other radical groups. It may well be, for instance, that the Muslim Brothers, oppressed in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, marginalized in several countries in the Gulf, could decide to share a common agenda with the Beit al Maqdis and hence with the ISIS.

The same could happen in the Gaza Strip where a pro-ISIS brigade named after Sheykh Abu al Nur al Maqdisi has appeared. A bonding of the Palestinian cause with that of the ISIS would be realistically dangerous. And if we move further west, the same could happen in the Polisario camps in Tindouf, where the frustrations deriving from a lack of any progress on the issue of Western Sahara has increased the support for the ISIS.

The ISIS will thus become a global threat if these ties become real. Time is on their part. The longer they will be left to consolidate their State, the lesser they will appear as a transitory phenomena. As recently stated by Saudi Arabia's longtime and now former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Saud bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, it will take a decade to

uproot Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's organization. But this provision does not contemplate the threat coming from the bonding of the different groups now scattered around the globe.

A PAN-ARAB FORCE TO DEFEAT THE ISIS?

Despite US air strikes, Iraqi military offensives or the use of “improper” weapons by the Syrian regime, the ISIS's militias have continued to win battles and benefit from a growing popular support that has led flocks of foreign volunteers to join Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in his conquests. As things currently stand, the ISIS is still a role model that has gained in credibility and attracted proselytes. This means that their threat has become significant and to be accounted for.

Regardless of the atrocities committed by the ISIS, although some may “appreciate” a conflict fought without any rules or limitations, the media hype surrounding the terrorist group seems to have pushed Al Qaeda's current head, Ayman al Zawahiri, to seek an agreement and a synergy with al Baghdadi. In the eyes of the Islamic radicals, the failure of the US air strikes to produce any tangible results is itself a success, a sign of destiny, a victory of faith against impiety, a feeling of invulnerability.

Frustration is instead the dominant feeling on the opposite front of those who would want to terminate the threat posed by the ISIS. But a war on terror will never be won with aerial bombardments, especially in the case of the ISIS and because of its widespread popular base, but only through a ground warfare. To date, apart from the countries directly involved such as Iraq and Syria, not one Arab country, the sole entitled to this task, has felt the need to deploy its forces on the ground to fight the ISIS's militias.

A Sunni coalition

Forced by the deterioration of the situation in Yemen, the issue of the creation of a Pan-Arab force to fight terrorism in the region has been brought forward by Saudi Arabia. The Saudis have recently tried to form a coalition of Sunni Arab countries to halt the Houthis. The man behind the proposal is Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi for a number of reasons: he is facing the threat from the ISIS both at home (Ansar Beit al Maqdis in the Sinai has declared its allegiance to al Baghdadi) and next door (ISIS militias station in Derna and Sirte in Libya), he badly needs Saudi financing and to regain a key role in Middle Eastern affairs after the July 2013 coup and the repression against the Muslim Brotherhood and the opposition that followed.

The issue of forming a Pan-Arab force was raised during the Arab League's meeting in Sharm el Sheikh on March 29, 2015 when events in Yemen were discussed. In that occasion, it was proposed that a high level committee be formed to study how to form a rapid intervention force of 40 thousand elite soldiers and how to share aerial and naval forces. It's not as clear instead how each of the 22 nations of the League will contribute to the force.

The discussions have moved forward from that first meeting in Sharm el Sheikh and embraced a wider array of objectives: the rapid intervention force could also be deployed domestically to quell internal instability, in this case the word “terrorism” includes any form of opposition and dissent, like the one that gave birth to the Arab Spring. The other target is the growing Iranian influence in the region that is pushing the Sunnis to join forces. The

latter objective has become more and more important following the agreement on Iran's nuclear programme, that could lead to a lifting of the sanctions against Tehran and that could grant the Ayatollah's regime the resources and the international credibility to play a hegemonic role in the region.

A very long road

The creation of a Pan-Arab force has been discussed by the Arab League for some time already, but never saw the light. Working groups were created to draft a proposal, but to no avail. There have been temporary military alliances during the 1967 and 1973 wars against Israel, while a coalition of Arab countries fought alongside the Americans during the Gulf War against Saddam Hussein. But that's as far as it goes.

The plan is now to revive a 1950 Joint Arab Defense Treaty that was signed by the members of the Arab League following the disastrous 1948 conflict against the Israelis. Article 2 states that an aggression against a signatory country is to be considered an act of war against all parties member to the treaty. The problem with this treaty is its outdated functioning: a meeting of Defense, Foreign Affairs and Interior Ministers, the definition of the objectives, the role of each nation and so on.

But the road to a Pan-Arab military force is still very long. It is pretty evident already that the bulk of the forces will be provided by Egypt, due to its dominating demographics in the Arab world, while the funding would be left to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. The main difficulties derive from having to build everything from scratch: a Headquarter (given the main actors it could either be in Cairo or Riyadh), a unique command and control system, an organization tasked with training the forces to fight, various operational and logistical bases.

Basically, since it is a very ambitious project, there are many hurdles to clear. There will be practical and psychological difficulties to overcome, since mutual distrust has been accumulated over the decades. Problems will also arise on the decision on what the priorities should be: Egypt wants to eliminate the ISIS in Libya, Saudi Arabia is concerned with the Iranian and Shia menace in Yemen, while Jordan, together with Syria and Iraq, is worried about the ISIS spilling over from its neighbors. And even once the priorities have been set, the issue will revolve around when and how to intervene, given the different approaches different countries have in the Arab world.

Opposition to this plan could also come from within the Arab League. Member countries like Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Somalia could oppose the idea of a Pan-Arab force intervening on their territory. In case an agreement cannot not be brokered by the Arab League, seeking an alternative could mean separate and more limited military agreements could be signed bilaterally by member countries.

The example of the GCC

The closest we now have to a Pan-Arab force has been created in December 2013 by the Gulf Cooperation Council. For the first time, a unified military command controls 100 thousand men, half of which are Saudis. During a previous attempt in 1982, the force

named "Peninsula Shield" was blocked by the Gulf's smaller countries that feared Saudi interference in their domestic affairs. The combined threat of the ISIS and Iran has pushed all objections aside.

Overall, the military coordination of six countries, like in the GCC, with similar weapons originating from the United States will not provide as many headaches as the idea of having to manage arsenals from 22 countries from the Arab League whose weapons come from both the Eastern and Western blocks. This would become a logistical nightmare.

The proposal by the Arab League, although still in its embryonic stage, has already met the favor of the United States. Washington is happy to support an Arab contingent that will fight the ISIS in its stead. That's why the CIA's chief, John Brennan, took a flight to Cairo on April 19, 2015 and showed up a few days before an Arab League's meeting on the issue. It was a tangible and visible sign of support at all levels. Other sources claim that during that visit Egypt also received the green light to strike the ISIS in Libya. It is in fact not a coincidence that US President Barack Obama has decided to lift the sanctions on weapons sales to Cairo just weeks ago.

A necessary dialogue

What the Egyptian and Saudi initiative cannot attain is an anti-ISIS cooperation with Iran. Tehran is helping out the regime's Pasdarans in Syria, it has provided volunteers to fight alongside Iraqi troops to retake Tikrit (and could do the same in the near future with Mosul), and is assisting the Hezbollah. If we had to single out a country that is currently fighting Al Baghdadi's militias, that would be Iran.

Clearly, no agreement between the Arab League and Tehran is now possible. Even though the Middle East is a volatile environment, there are too many diverging opinions on how to solve the different crisis in the region. Furthermore, the Sunni vs Shia divide cannot be overcome so easily. All of these elements combined mean the military elimination of the ISIS will be more difficult to achieve, unless the United States and Iran appease themselves. But this scenario will see the light only in the long term.

The formation of the Pan-Arab rapid intervention force would be an important step towards the definitive crushing of the different forms of regional terrorism. Muslim boots on the ground would deprive the ISIS of one of its main arguments and sources of consensus, like the fight against the "crusaders", the "apostates" and the "impious". The fact that these troops would have a similar mindset and the same culture as that of their opponents would also mean that no pity will be granted to those defeated. But, after all, there aren't that many followers of the Geneva Convention in this part of the world.